Excellence in Rehabilitation and Restoration: Flathead National Forest

The summer of 2003 was a summer of wildfires and smoke on the Flathead National Forest in northwestern Montana. Following several years of extended drought, all conditions were ripe for a fire season that would set a new standard with which future fire seasons will be compared. The season started with the Wedge Canyon Fire on July 16; it burned over 53,000 acres before ending with winter snows in October. The Flathead National Forest, Montana Department of Natural Resources, and Glacier National Park had over 307,000 acres burned. Several of the fires crossed jurisdictional boundaries between Glacier National Park and the Forest, and the Flathead alone had 21 fires over 100 acres in size, with 150 fires burning over 157,000 acres.

The Robert Fire started July 23, burning over 57,000 acres; the Little Salmon Complex – 26 fires – burned over 88,000 acres, the Blackfoot Lake Complex was 26,000 acres, and the Crazy Horse Fire was over 11,000 acres. Over 98,000 person/days were committed to firefighting efforts. The multitude of fires called for extensive Burned Area Emergency Restoration (BAER).

Even before the fires were contained, BAER teams were activated and rehabilitation/restoration activities were under way. The BAER teams worked across boundaries on both Glacier National Park and the Flathead National Forest. At the same time, the Natural Resources Conservation Service assessed rehabilitation needs on private lands. Other partners included Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Flathead County Weed Department, and the Northwest Montana RC&D.

Throughout the fall of 2003 and the spring and summer of 2004, extensive BAER work was completed. This work was far-reaching and included cleaning, stabilizing, and replacing culverts, removing hazard trees along roads and trails, stabilizing trail surfaces, noxious weed treatment, reseeding, tree planting, and stabilizing hillside slopes. Roadbeds were also refurbished to meet the State of Montana BMPs, and heritage sites were stabilized.

All this work occurred at the same time that two major environment impact statements and an environmental assessment were being crafted to salvage the fire-killed timber – which stretched the workforce to the limit.

The winter of 2003 and spring of 2004 had an average snowpack in the mountains with a very early snowmelt and runoff. The summer had near-normal precipitation, and the fall was quite wet. All the stabilization and restoration work was effective; none of the treated areas had significant erosion or sediment or mass failure.

Monitoring has been a part of all projects; most was associated with noxious weed control after the fires. Treatments and seeding to control erosion were effective. All culvert installations had either fisheries or water personnel on site to ensure that the project proceeded with the proper concern for fish and water.